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Manuals of Fellowship

THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT

MICHAEL J. SKINNER

Fourth Series

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The Manuals of Fellowship, of which this pamphlet is one, are issued in connexion with the Methodist School of Fellowship which meets at Swanwick each year during the first week in August. The School combines the spirit of a holiday with fellowship, study and discussion, and for many years has trained leaders and stimulated and nourished Methodists both young and old.

The Manuals are studied at the annual Summer School itself, but are designed to be used in Methodist classes and groups throughout the year.

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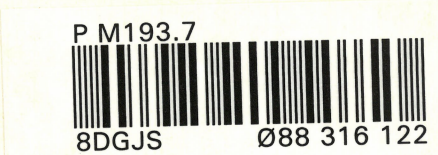
PAMPHLET

THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT

By

MICHAEL J. SKINNER



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Preface

We are told that chapters 5-7 in St Matthew's Gospel are the most popular in the whole Bible. Early Christian scholars certainly quoted the fifth chapter more than any other in the Bible and Matthew 5-7 more than any other three consecutive chapters. But for all their continued popularity down the centuries how puzzling they have proved to be!

The six short studies in this Manual of Fellowship offer one kind of approach to some of the basic problems posed by the Sermon. (A recent book has tabulated no less than twelve different approaches, though many of these admittedly overlap one another.) The object of this Manual is to start its readers thinking, furiously if possible, rather than to persuade them that the answers given to the six questions are the only possible ones.

What is presented in the following pages is not a verse by verse commentary but a goad to studying one. Among the many commentaries available is A. M. Hunter's *Design for Life* (S.C.M. Press, revised edition 1965), which is quite first class and very readable.

For further general reading, the following can be recommended:

J. Jeremias, *The Sermon on the Mount* (Athlone Press. Very short, quite superb).
C. H. Dodd, *Gospel and Law* (C.U.P.).
T. W. Manson, *Ethics and the Gospel* (S.C.M.).
A. D. Lindsay, *The Two Moralities* (Eyre and Spottiswode).
D. Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (S.C.M.).
H. McArthur, *Understanding the Sermon on the Mount* (Epworth Press).

Is it a Series of Hard and Fast Rules?

Passages for special reference — Mt. $5^{14-16, 38-48}$; 6^{1-6}; $7^{1-6, 21-8}$.

'Do not set yourself against the man who wrongs you', said Jesus (5^{39}). Are we to understand such teaching as a hard and fast rule applicable to every occasion when we are wronged?

1. *The question sharpened by two stories.* The first story is of Billy Bray, the well-known Cornish evangelist. Before his conversion he was a noted pugilist. One day after his conversion a fellow-miner struck him, wishing to get his revenge for the terror in which the unconverted Bray had formerly kept him. All that Bray did by way of reply was to say, 'May God forgive you, even as I forgive you.' The assailant was tremendously impressed, knowing that the natural man in Bray wanted to knock him out, and could have done so. He realized that Bray had now a power to master himself. The assailant, we are told, was later converted as a result of Bray's mercifulness. This story seems to illustrate in a straightforward manner the precise intention of Christ's teaching in 5^{39}.

Can the same be said of the second story? This story (for the details of which I am dependent on oral tradition) is also about a Christian and a boxer, this time an Anglican bishop to boot, the first one ever to be sent to New Zealand. Selwyn, after whom Selwyn College, Cambridge, is named, was one day trekking across open country in New Zealand when he came upon a gang of navvies making a road. On

seeing the young bishop one of them came up to him and struck him on the cheek. 'Now', said his assailant, 'do what your religion tells you to do, turn the other cheek.' Selwyn meekly turned the other and was promptly buffeted on that as well. He then told the navvy that he proposed to give him a few lessons in boxing, and the navvy agreed to take him on, obviously not realizing that this athletic young bishop had got his blue for boxing at Cambridge (as well as for rowing in the first Oxford-Cambridge Boat Race)! Within no time the navvy was knocked out for a good count of nine. The upshot of the incident was that the navvy became a devoted disciple of Selwyn and was converted to Christianity.

One man was converted through Bray's refusal to fight, the other through Selwyn's boxing-lesson! Yet, if we take the Sermon on the Mount as a series of hard and fast rules, we must adjudge Selwyn to have been wrong. He did set himself against the man who had wronged him, even though he first turned the other cheek. Even though he did not knock the man out through a desire for revenge, nor through loss of temper, can he really be said to have obeyed Jesus? Was not this display of 'muscular Christianity', however fine Selwyn's motives, distinctly unchristian?

2. *Some consequences of taking the whole Sermon as a a series of inflexible rules.* a. *The Sermon is made to contradict itself.* 5^{16} tells us to let our light shine before men. whereas 6^{1} warns us off practising our piety before men. We are left somewhat perplexed, like the man wondering what to do with his burden as he consulted in turn Psalm 55^{22}, Galatians 6^{2} and 6^{5}. Again the Sermon tells us not to judge others lest we be condemned, but 7^{6} seems to contradict the preceding five verses, for it tells us to adjudge certain people to be dogs and swine.

b. *The Sermon is made to support nudism.* 5^{40} tells us

that we are not to stand upon our rights. If in a court of law someone claims for himself a Christian's undergarment, the Christian is to surrender it and, what is more, he is to give him what his accuser has not demanded, the outer garment (Exodus 22^{26}). As that great Presbyterian scholar, T. W. Manson, pointed out, the result of literal obedience by a Jewish Christian would be nudism, since a Jew wore only these two garments.

c. *The Sermon is made to open the door to demoralisation.* 5^{42} tells us to give to the beggar and not to refuse the borrower. William Law, a famous contemporary of John Wesley, took this to be an inflexible rule. Being a wealthy man, he came to give away something like £2,500 a year (multiply for the late twentieth-century equivalent!), thereby succeeding in demoralising the whole neighbourhood which proceeded to live off his bounty.

3. *Doing and being.* Despite these three consequences of understanding the Sermon in the main as a series of inflexible rules, does not Jesus, it may be asked, regard His teaching precisely in this way? Take, for instance, 7^{24}: 'Everyone who hears these words of mine and *does* them will be like a wise man. . . .' The answer is that by 'do' Jesus often means us to understand 'be'. When He tells us to forgive seventy times seven He does not mean 'forgive four hundred and ninety times and then relax'. He means 'be essentially a forgiving person' (Mt. 18^{22}). The recommended activity of forgiving seventy times seven is instanced to suggest to our imaginations, even to evoke in us, the right attitude and disposition. You will not forgive four hundred and ninety times unless you have become merciful. You will not imitate the example of the Good Samaritan unless you first come to share his spirit (Lk. 10^{37}). 'Do' is to be translated into 'be'.

So also with 6^{6}. Jesus is not meaning that we should pray

only when we are by ourselves, otherwise He would be condemning the public worship in which He so faithfully participated. What He does mean is that when we pray we should be so far from wanting the praise of men that on this score we should be quite happy praying in private with no one to praise us for our piety. St Augustine rightly concluded, 'I suppose the Lord does not refer to the place here but to the intention of the one who prays'. Once again it is a matter of 'being' or 'not being' rather than 'doing' or 'not doing'.

Granted that our intention is God's glory, then let the world have a grandstand view of our good deeds (5^{16})! Similarly with judging, the teaching is concerned more with 'being' than with 'doing'. As parents, schoolteachers, parsons, members of the Leaders' Meeting, we have to assess the character of others, even to the extent of concluding that some are swine. However, we are not to judge in a hard, censorious way, expending so much self-righteous indignation and moral passion on the sins of others that we have none left for our own (7^{1-6}). In short, we are to *be* people who can judge without sinning.

4. *The verdict on Bishop Selwyn.* T .W. Manson used to say that the teaching of Jesus 'is a compass rather than an ordnance map', its object 'to give direction rather than directions'. He would have approved St Augustine's wise comment about the 'commands' to turn the other cheek and to go the second mile: '. . . these precepts pertain rather to the inward disposition of the heart than to the actions which are done in the sight of men, requiring us, in the inmost heart, to cherish patience along with benevolence, but in the outward action to do what seems most likely to benefit those whose good we seek'. On this Augustinian view, and perhaps on yours too, Selwyn's action is vindicated.

Questions for meditation and discussion

1. Was Selwyn's action Christian or unchristian?
2. How do you decide when to give money to beggars (5^{42})?
3. How would you resolve the apparent contradictions in the Sermon?
4. What is the nature of the Christian character that Jesus is depicting in 5^{38-48}? Is it significant that apparently He did not turn the other cheek at His trial (John 18^{22-3})?

THE SECOND QUESTION

Is it the Fulfilment of the Law of Moses?

Passage for special reference — Mt. 5[17-48]

THE six so-called 'Antitheses' in Matthew 5[17-48], all characterized by Christ's authoritative 'But I say unto you', force us to ask the question, 'How did Jesus fulfil the Law?' (5[17]). This chapter contends that He fulfilled it not in the manner of a rabbinical legislator, not even in the manner of a reformer of laws, but by converting a one-mile into a two-mile religion.

1. *Not in the manner of a rabbinical legislator.* The rabbis set out to regulate every part of a Jew's life from the cradle to the grave. For this purpose the 613 laws in the Pentateuch (the first five books of the Bible) were not sufficiently detailed. They had to be supplemented by innumerable applications to every nook and cranny of daily life (applications, it was claimed, that were whispered in the ears of Moses on Sinai, but not written down at the time. Jesus regarded them merely as human traditions (Mk. 7[13])).

The Sabbath laws furnish a prize example of this rabbinical method. The work forbidden in the Fourth Commandment was defined in thirty-nine categories, which were then subdivided, endless rulings dealing with endless questions. What, for instance, constituted a burden? The carrying of a burden on the Sabbath constituted work, it was answered, if it weighed more than a dried fig or more than the amount of milk you could manage at one gulp! This ruling did not settle the matter. What about the wearing of a wooden leg, or even dentures? So the corpus of case law grew and grew.

The Scribes and Pharisees, whose righteousness Christians were to exceed (5[20]), were the people who devoted themselves to this religion of legal minutiae. The contrast between their approach to the questions of human behaviour and that of Jesus is unmistakable (see chapter 1). They concentrated on the details of conduct. He on the broad principles motivating a Christian. They set out to provide an ordnance map, He a compass.

2. *Not even in the manner of a reformer of laws.* Some see Jesus as the producer of a law-code, so revised as to be brought into complete subjection to the basic purposes of the Mosaic Law. This revision, it is maintained, involved the development of some laws and the abolition of others. Jesus developed, for example, the laws against murder and adultery (Mt. 5[21-2, 27-30]), while He repealed the laws of divorce and oath-taking in order to fulfil God's requirements for marriage and the telling of truth on all occasions (Mt. 5[31-2], cf. Mk. 10[2-9], Mt. 5[33-7]).

With the *Lex Talionis* (Exodus 21[23-4]), 'an eye for an eye', it was perhaps a case of development rather than of abolition. This law, which registered a distinct advance on the custom of indiscriminate vengeance which preceded it, was further subjected to God's primary intention, the injured man now being deprived of all rights of retaliation—except the right to love his enemy and to turn the other cheek (5[38-48]).

The real defect in this interpretation of the Sermon as a revised version of the old Law is not that it appears to conflict with Matthew 5[18-19]. (It is possible that these puzzling words were originally spoken by Jesus in irony over the refusal of the rabbis to countenance the slightest alteration in either the Law or their case law. Luke 16[16-18] lends plausibility to this theory.) No, the real defect in this picture of the Sermon as a new Mosaic Law is that it makes

a mole-hill out of a mountain, makes our Lord a mere revisionist instead of casting Him in his rightful role of the revolutionary who fulfilled the Law *by going beyond the sphere of law.*

3. *By converting a one-mile into a two-mile religion.* Jesus fulfilled the Law by developing its two basic principles of love to God and neighbour (Mk. 12^{29-31}; Mt. 22^{40}). But love in such a developed form cannot be contained within the straight-jacket of a precise law-code. It is not only varied in its expression (as Bray and Selwyn demonstrated) but infinite in its range. The second mile (5^{41}) is as long as grace, never coming to an end, not even at the 490th time of forgiving (Mt. 18^{22}).

So it is that Jesus, in teaching about this unending second mile, could not be a legislator, either in a rabbinic or a revisionist manner. His method was more akin to that of a poet. His aim was to stimulate our imagination to picture something of the infinite range of love. He achieved this by giving illustrations of Christian love (or its reverse) in action, illustrations often in the guise of commands. His teaching, for instance, about non-resistance, did not constitute a rigid rule but a depicting of Christian character, to which, so we have argued, Selwyn as well as Bray conformed. Thus the *Lex Talionis* was not developed into another law, so much as taken beyond the realm of legislation.

Has the Christian, then, to be content with only one rule, viz., 'Love God, and do as you will'? Not quite. Jesus offers us some general principles or compass-bearings like 'Seek first His Kingdom' and 'Enter by the narrow gate' (Mt. 6^{33} and 7^{13}). For the rest we are offered not only examples of how the Christian spirit *may* express itself in *certain* circumstances but also an example or two of how the Christian spirit *will* express itself (or refrain from expressing itself) in *every* circumstance. For instance, since lustful

thoughts are *always* a denial of Christian love, Matthew 5^{28} can not only be seen as a negative description of Christian character but also used as a rule.

It is debatable how many other pictures suggestive of the quality and direction of Christian behaviour turn out to be *incidentally* rigid rules as well. Many Christians would put Christ's teaching about divorce in this category despite the fact that St Paul (I Cor. 7^{10-15}) was to add another exception to that of Matthew 5^{32} and 19^{9} (cf. Mk. 10^{2-9}). Again, does the teaching about oaths (Mt. 5^{33-7}) constitute rigid law, or is it to be put in the same bracket as the injunction not to pray in public (see section 3 of chapter 1)?

Since Christ gives us, at most, so few rules, can we look to the unfulfilled Law of Moses for more? What place, for instance, should the Ten Commandments have in our lives? The answer is that we may take them at least as preliminary guides for behaviour, breathe into these rules of the first mile something of the spirit of the second and interpret them in the positive manner that Christ exemplified in regard to the Sabbath commandment. Since they constitute rules of sanctified common sense essential to the life of any healthy community, we will usually obey them, though at the dictates of love we will obviously lie to a maniac asking which way his intended victim went! Jesus did not disown the Decalogue in fulfilling it (Mk. 10^{19}). Love will go far beyond it into uncharted country, but will usually go the whole of the first mile with it.

Questions for meditation and discussion

1. Did Jesus mean us never to take oaths? See 2 Corinthians 1^{23}.
2. On what grounds, if any, is divorce permissible for the Christian?
3. When would it be right to break any of the Ten Commandments?
4. Do Christians need detailed rules for behaviour, or is it sufficient to say with St Augustine, 'Love God, and do as you will'?

THE THIRD QUESTION

Is it for the Man-in-the-Street?

Passages for special reference — Mt. 5^{1-16} and $6^{7-15, 25-33}$.

'My religion, you know, is the Sermon on the Mount.' The speaker is the so-called 'man-in-the-street'. We all know him. He tells us that the Sermon comprises straightforward rules for good neighbourliness, and that this creed of being kind is all the creed this poor world needs. In his view there is no need to go in for Church worship or to bother one's head with theology.

The first two chapters offered some reflections on this theory that the Sermon is a code of straightforward rules. Now it is time to assert that the Sermon is concerned with theology as well as ethics. According to Joachim Jeremias the Sermon is a description of 'lived faith'. We may take this vivid phrase to indicate four things: 1. Faith in Jesus and His Gospel. 2. Power as the product of such faith. 3. Power sufficient for conformity to Christ's teaching. 4. A power not given to the man-in-the-street.

1. *Faith in Jesus and His Gospel.* What God has done for us in Christ is theologically, as well as chronologically, prior to what we do for Him. 'We love, because He first loved us' (I John 4^{19}). The Christian religion is concerned primarily to give us good news, not good advice, to tell us about the Cross on the Hill before the Sermon on the Mount. The demands of the Sermon are therefore to be seen in the context of the offer of the Gospel.

The Gospel is the good news that God offers us forgive-

ness and invites believers to share as adopted sons in Christ's filial relationship to Himself, with its bold use of that most intimate word, Abba, a relationship which involves also a new fraternal relationship with others who accept His offer. This Gospel is incarnate in Christ, the bringer of divine pardon and the reconciler of man to God and of believer to believer. With Jesus, therefore, there comes into this world a new order of relationships, described by the New Testament as the Kingdom of God. This Kingdom, this kingly rule of God in men's hearts and lives, was first established on this earth in the filial obedience of Jesus and His communion with the Father. Our Lord lived and died to bring others into this Kingdom that they might enjoy the blessings of fellowship with God and its powers over evil. So it was that He began His ministry with this clarion-call, 'The time has come. The Kingdom of God is upon you; repent and believe the Gospel' (Mk. 1^{15}).

2. *Power as the product of such faith.* We are enabled to repent and believe when the Holy Spirit takes away the veil from our eyes and shows us the real Jesus. When we recognize Him as Lord and Saviour we see ourselves in a new light. We are cut to the heart and repent. We no longer trust in ourselves but believe in Him, crucified and risen, for salvation.

This seeing Jesus and believing in Him causes Christians also to love Him. We love Him for what He was and is, we love Him for all He has done for us. Now, when we really love someone, we discover the power to do anything for them, even to the sacrificing of our lives. Love brings mighty power in its train. So it is that the Holy Spirit, in bringing us to faith in Jesus, gives us at the same time love and power, as well as His many other 'fruits' (Gal. 5^{22}). We begin 'to live our faith' as the disciples did after Pente-

cost. We discover unsuspected power to witness to non-believers (Acts 1^{8}), even power to love our fellow-believers (Acts 2^{44-7}). The Kingdom has indeed come upon us!

3. *Power sufficient for conformity to Christ's teaching.* We can now see why the Sermon, in its evocative description of this victorious living, is to be called 'lived faith'. Furthermore, since faith in Christ produces power to live the life described by the Sermon, views like those of the 'Interim-Ethic' school are, in this respect, seen to be unnecessary.

The members of this school argue with cogency that Jesus expected an imminent end to the world through a catastropic eruption of God into human history (Mk. 13 being one of their supporting passages, though notice 13^{10}, which might seem to imply a considerable delay). They then go on to maintain that Christ's teaching was designed only for the short interim period before the End. Just because the interim was so short, they aver, and because of the additional spur to moral effort in the anticipated imminence of the Last Judgment, men could be expected to rise for the brief while to the heroic standards demanded by the Sermon.

Apart from the fact that these theorists often seem to regard the Sermon as a set of inflexible rules, one of the main defects of their position would appear to be the supposition that Jesus, by Himself, is not able to break the power of cancelled sin. In gazing at the future coming of the Kingdom in full power they play down the fact that the Kingdom has already come in substantial measure with Jesus. They fail to recognize that our Lord, invested with the powers of God's Kingdom, has managed to make Bray, Selwyn and myriads of justified believers more than conquerors in the fight.

Believers love much, not because they think the End is near, but because they have been forgiven much, because

God is love (5^{45}). They bear a distinct resemblance to the men of the Beatitudes, even though faith has not made them perfect overnight, even though they will have to pray forgiveness all their days for falling short of the infinitude of love. Through the Spirit's gift of sight they have become poor in spirit, no longer trusting in their 'own righteousness, but in His manifold and great mercies'. Longing to serve the beloved Christ they hunger and thirst after the doing of the Father's will; as members of the Kingdom they are meek under the yoke of that will, and they become pure in heart as they seek to do only His will. They are merciful and they are peacemakers because they have received peace and pardon in abundance from their Father in heaven. They mourn, as from their Master they learn to bear the sins and sorrows of men upon their hearts. They rejoice in suffering persecution for Christ's sake. They are the salt of the earth and the light of the world as they press on to perfection. They are the proof that the Sermon presupposes the Gospel and its power unto salvation.

4. *A power not given to the man-in-the-street.* Even if he could obey the Sermon's precepts, he could not practise them in the all-important spirit of deep gratitude to God in Christ. But lacking faith in Christ and the Gospel, can he even obey? Can he, for instance, pray the Lord's Prayer, the quintessence of child-like trust in God, or subscribe to 6^{25-33}? Can he pray with the men of the Kingdom, 'Thy will be done'? If he could do such things he would be introducing theology into his good-neighbour-code, nay, more, he would be submitting to become poor in spirit, to being no more the man-in-the-street. When did he last read the Sermon? Let him re-read it that it may serve as a tutor to bring him to the Saviour.

Questions for meditation and discussion

1. How would you define Christianity in a dozen words?
2. Why be good?
3. In what sense is the First Beatitude the basic one?
4. How could Christ claim that His yoke is easy (Mt. 11^{30})?

THE FOURTH QUESTION

Is it Applicable to the Life of the World?

Passages for special reference — Mt. 5^{33-48} and 7^{1-5}.

1. *It is not immediately concerned with trilateral relationships.* We have argued that the Sermon, in the process of depicting Christian character, furnishes examples of some of the ways in which the love for God and man, evoked by the Gospel, might conceivably express itself in certain circumstances. It is, however, most important to realize that these examples have at the most no more than *two* people in view. There is the Christian and the person who strikes him, or there is the Christian and the man who asks him for money. In such pictures there are no third parties involved. The relationships are bilateral, not trilateral. There is no example in the Sermon about what a Christian might be found doing if someone attacks his wife, nor is there anything to suggest that he should necessarily turn her other cheek to the smiter. Again, it is not specified what a Christian, hard put to it to provide for the barest necessities of his family, is to do when someone asks him for money.

The omission of third parties may be partly due to the fact that much of the teaching was given to missionaries on active service. When assailants struck their cheeks, as when the navvy attacked Selwyn, there were no third parties to take into consideration. It is also true that examples taken from bilateral relationships portrayed in the boldest possible relief the character of the Christian

man refusing to stand on his own rights. We are most certainly not obliged to draw the conclusion from Christ's exclusive use of bilateral illustrations that He was indifferent to the normal life of society with its trilateral and, indeed, multilateral relationships.

2. *As a code of laws it is not applicable to the life of the everyday world.* If, in this very imperfect world, secular rulers were ever to give a literalistic obedience to such prohibitions as 'Resist not one who is evil' and 'Judge not', then their people would be given over to anarchy. This consideration has led some thinkers to deduce that Jesus designed the Sermon for a paradise on earth to be inaugurated by His second coming. But we may be permitted to wonder whether in such a wonderful society it would be necessary to pray for forgiveness or, still more, to turn the other cheek!

Other theorists, again taking the Sermon as law, have supposed (as we saw in the last chapter) that the Sermon was designed for the short interval before Christ's second coming. In this brief interval men could live as though they had no families, and life could be reduced to a matter of bilateral relationships.

Another theory, which like the others infers that the Sermon is not applicable to the life of this fallen world, was held by Tolstoy. Bent on a literalistic obedience to the Sermon, he decided eventually to contract out of the normal life of the world. 'Without my wife, without my children, I could live a holy life', he asserted.

3. *Only as a description of Christian character is it relevant to the life of the world.* Understood as a description of Christian Character, and not as a code of laws, the Sermon indicates the spirit which will motivate Christians in all their relationships, without specifying how they will apply the twin principles of love for God and love for man

to the often terribly complex situations of modern society. In this task of application Christians will have to realize that in trilateral relationships they are not called upon necessarily to be unselfish with other people's interests, nor to betray their friends in loving their enemies.

One way in which the Christian will normally show love for his neighbours is in his support of law and order. Since the welfare of his fellows necessitates a stable society, he may find himself on the local council, or a magistrate, if not a hangman, which post Luther thought he ought to accept if qualified and required! Anyway, good government is an ordinance of God (Romans 13^{1-7}) and Christians should support it, though not necessarily to the extent of becoming executioners!

The Sermon will also inspire the Christian to undertake the cause of the oppressed and underprivileged peoples of this world. He may be found not only binding up the wounds of the man left half-dead by robbers, but perhaps attacking the robbers if he happens to arrive on the scene earlier than the Good Samaritan did. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Christian martyr and author of a famous book on the Sermon, went further, joining in a plot to assassinate Hitler, since the killing of that tyrant seemed the only way to save civilisation. Whether we adjudge Bonhoeffer's action to have been Christian or not, we may agree that Christians have no mandate to support the bad policies of evil government.

Jesus undertook the cause of His fellow-men by fighting the Pharisees and Sadducees who oppressed and exploited them. For Jesus the loving of enemies did not mean letting them get away with policies harmful to others. His invective against the Pharisees (Mt. 23, Lk. 20^{47}), coupled with His action against the Sadducees (Mk. 11^{15-19}; John 2^{13-17}), illustrates the fact that He would not betray His

friends by being soft with His enemies. Even if in His policy of toughness with His enemies there had not lain the best hope of awakening them to their spiritual plight, would He not still, in His defence of the oppressed, have continued to play the role of a lion rather than that of a meek and gentle lamb?

It is, however, often desperately difficult to know how to balance one claim against another. If Jesus treats us as children in the matter of salvation, He certainly treats us as adults in the matter of conduct. He will afford us the aid of the Holy Spirit and the counsel of fellow-Christians, but the decision will often be agonising, even though, like the men of the Beatitudes, we are bent on doing His will.

How, for instance, are we to balance the claims of family against what may be a larger good? At a particular juncture the demands of the Kingdom necessitated Jesus leaving home and summoning a few others to do the same. His reasons for bidding His family farewell were scarcely those of Tolstoy, for He would not have stayed thirty years at Nazareth if perfection and family life were mutually exclusive. The larger good of mankind, rather than our personal edification, will sometimes compel us, as it did Him, to be unselfish with other people's interests.

Another agonising task is to decide what methods a Christian may legitimately employ. John 2^{15} tells us that Jesus used a whip. Bonhoeffer was prepared to kill one man to save thousands. But can a Christian participate in modern warfare? More important perhaps than our decision as to the methods is the motive prompting it and the spirit in which we carry it out. It is the spirit inculcated by the Sermon, rather than any particular expression of it, that is most needed in the affairs of men.

Questions for meditation and discussion.

1. Should the claims of family stop us from offering for service overseas?
2. What support does the New Testament give for Christian pacifism?
3. How would you defend Jesus from C. G. Montefiore's accusation that He failed to love His enemies, the Pharisees and Sadducees?
4. Luther considered that Christ and Christian Ministers were too occupied with their specialist work to undertake civic duties? Do you agree?

Is it Pie-in-the-Sky Religion?

Passages for special reference — Mt. 5^{1-11}; $6^{1-6, 16-21}$; 7^{21-27}.

JESUS is for ever warning us off the road to hell and enticing us back to the heavenly road. If we have lustful eyes, we should pluck them out (5^{29}—certainly one command that no one takes literally!). We must not use up our heavenly reward by taking it out in the form of men's praise ($6^{1, 5, 16}$). We are to be realists and lay up treasure in heaven (6^{19-21}). We are to be astute and lay a rock foundation of obedience for our mansion (7^{24-7}). Our reward will be great if we endure persecution (5^{11}), and we shall be called sons of God if, with Bray and Selwyn, we love our enemies and pray for our persecutors (5^{44-5}).

Many Christians find such talk distinctly embarrassing. They went, with Francis Xavier, to love and serve Jesus for His own sake, not in order to win heaven or escape hell (*M.H.B.* 446). They fear that Jesus is addressing Himself to their baser motives and they would prefer to pray with Ignatius Loyola, 'Teach us, good Lord, to serve Thee as Thou deservest . . . to labour and not to ask for any reward, save that of knowing that we do Thy will'. They shrink from a 'pie-in-the-sky-when-you-die' kind of religion, which uses the promise of heaven as a bribe to make them good, which replaces love with prudential calculation, and which might suggest that we can, by living in a certain way, merit heaven. This chapter seeks to allay the fears of such people by putting Christ's teaching on reward in another light.

1. *We cannot serve God without reward.* It is a law of the spiritual as well as of the natural life, that men reap what they have sown (Gal. 6^{7-9}). We may consider our-

selves high-minded enough to serve God without thought of reward, but it is certain that we cannot serve Him without reward. As F. W. Robertson, that great preacher of the nineteenth century, once put it: 'Do right and God's recompense to you will be the power of doing more right. Give and God's reward to you will be the power of giving more. Love and God's reward to you will be the capacity of more love.' In this world, created and sustained by God, love grows through its own exercise. Whatever else, then, Jesus is doing in His teaching about reward, He is stating facts. Like a good physician He is informing us that certain attitudes and habits lead to good health, while others lead to bad health. The appeal here is not to our baser instincts, but rather to that part of us which aspires to holiness, that is, to spiritual health.

2. *We cannot earn our reward.* The inability to serve God without reward does not for a moment mean that we can earn our reward. We may reap, 'if we faint not', what has been sown, but let us remember that God has been responsible for the sowing.

The seeds of eternal life were sown in us when the Holy Spirit gave us faith in God the Son and in God the Father. From that faith sprang up Christian character and Christian acts (see chapter 3). The credit for this 'lived faith' goes to the Holy Trinity. Christian deeds are far more His deeds than ours (Eph. 2^{8-10}). This being so, we cannot regard our deeds as establishing a claim upon God to reward us with salvation. We are not like factory-hands claiming wages in respect of the work they have done, but like little children trusting not in their own goodness but in that of their parents (Mt. 18^{3}; Lk. 18^{9-17}).

It is true that without Christian goodness we are not ripe for heaven. The teaching of 7^{21} makes that clear, but the obedience of which it speaks is one issuing from God-given

faith in Christ, and is not to be credited to our merit account. 7^{22-3} asserts that such faith is indispensable for Christian goodness. Deeds not springing from fellowship with Christ, even though performed ostensibly in His name, do not issue in ultimate fellowship with Him. Faith without works is no faith, and works without faith are no good. It is only 'lived faith', produced by the Triune God, which leads on to heaven.

3. *We should respond to the promise of reward.* When examined, the promised reward is found to appeal to our highest motives, not to our lowest. What mean, mercenary-minded, calculating, loveless person is going to be attracted by the promises contained in the second halves of the Beatitudes? 5^{6}, for instance, offers us the complete capacity to do God's will, while 5^{9} promises that we shall be sons of God, people reflecting His nature of love. 5^{8} claims that, once given an undivided allegiance to God, we shall see Him in all His holiness and majesty, a prospect from which the natural man positively shrinks. Christianity, after all, does not seem to be exactly 'pie-in-the-sky-when-you-die'.

These rewards are tempting to Christians because they promise the completion of what God has already begun in us. As Christians we have been given the taste of holiness, love, fellowship with God, and our appetite is whetted for more. We want the large 'second-helping' which the second halves of the Beatitudes promise to the men of the first halves. We do not want rewards which have nothing to do with heavenly treasure. We want our true reward. Sir Winston Churchill's true reward for his gargantuan labours in the last war did not reside in the many decorations and plaudits he received on all sides, but in the bringing of his work to a successful conclusion. Similarly, the reward that really tempts the Christian is that which pledges him final victory in his spiritual warfare. As C. S. Lewis put it in *The*

Weight of Glory: 'The proper rewards are not simply tacked on to the activity for which they are given, but are the activity itself in consummation.'

We should respond to the promise of such reward, most of all, because it points us to what Christ wants for us, what He wants us to want. The more we respond to what He wants, the more impelled to holiness we shall be. We shall so discipline our lives that Christ may be given the chance, through His means of grace, to tend the seed that He has sown and to evoke even greater faith and love in us.

If the reward points us to what Christ wants for us, then we do not have to choose (despite Xavier) between loving Christ and being motivated by the hope of future bliss. The latter is included in the former. Furthermore, we shall most surely ask for a greater reward (despite Ignatius) than that of knowing that we do God's will, precisely because it is God's will that we should ask for this greater reward! Admittedly, our request for 'Pardon, holiness, and heaven' includes a petition for self-fulfilment, but if there is any selfishness left in that petition, it is the one bit of selfishness the Christian is permitted. Even so, is it very selfish to pray to be unselfish for ever and ever? Is it selfish to pray that we may be made what God meant us to be, what Christ lived and died to make us, especially when being raised with Christ necessitates a crucifixion of self-love?

Questions for meditation and discussion

1. Is the criticism of Xavier and Ignatius justified?
2. If men reap what they sow, is not some doctrine of hell inevitable?
3. Would the wicked be at home in heaven? Would it be merciful of God to send them there?
4. What difference do you detect between meritorious works and 'lived faith' as qualifiers for heaven?

THE SIXTH QUESTION

Is its Teaching Unique?

Passages for special reference — Mt. 6^{9-13} and 7^{7-12}.

It comes as a fearful shock to many Christians to be told that parallels, more or less close, can be found in Judaism and other religions for most of Christ's sayings. They begin to wonder whether Christianity is unique after all and, if it is not, what right the Church has to preach it to people of other faiths.

1. *Examples of similarities.* Here is a great contemporary of St Paul, Seneca, an exponent of Stoicism: 'If you would imitate God, be gracious to the ungracious; for the sun shines on the wicked, and the sea is open to pirates' (cf. Mt. 5^{45}). Here, six centuries before Christ, is Lao Tsze, the founder of Taoism: 'He that humbleth himself shall be preserved entire. He that has little shall succeed. He that hath much shall go astray.' Another Taoist saying is, 'Repay injury with kindness.'

Many faiths have their own versions of the so-called Golden Rule of Matthew 7^{12}. Confucius, like the Buddhists, Stoics and Jews had the rule in a negative form: 'What you do not want done to yourself, do not do to others,' he taught. There is a well-known story of Shammai, a Jewish rabbi, driving away with a foot rule a Gentile who promised to become a Jew if the whole law could be summarized while he stood on one leg. But Hillel, Shammai's rival, obliged the Gentile with this summary: 'What is hateful to

yourself, do to no other; that is the whole law, the rest is commentary. Go and learn.'

We could go on multiplying examples. Not even the Lord's Prayer is original in its phraseology. All its clauses have parallels of a sort in Jewish liturges. Here is one example from a Jewish prayer that Jesus may have known: 'Lead not my feet into the power of transgression. Bring me not into the power of a sin, nor into the power of a temptation, nor into the power of evil.'

2. *Such similarities should not alarm us.* The originality of a great teacher does not consist in the breaking of utterly new ground. His teaching is not unique in the same way as the achievement of putting the first man on the moon will be. On the contrary, if His sayings had no parallels elsewhere we might well suspect tht divine character of His teaching.

The fact is that God has never left Himself without witnesses. He has always been speaking to men, teaching them through their experiences in this world of His, forcing them to ask fundamental questions about the purpose of life and the way to live it, and helping them to arrive at some answers. It is true that human blindness, folly, insensitivity and sin have rendered very imperfect the reception of much of the divine teaching, while much undivine dross has been added to it. Nevertheless, enough of God's truth has percolated through to men for non-Christian religions to have sayings similar to those of Jesus. It is true that in many instance the similarities are more apparent than real, but often, as with the Golden Rule, the parallels have real substance. This parallelism should not dismay us, for we should see in it but one more confirmation that Jesus was indeed the Son of that God who has always been speaking to men. Furthermore, such parallelism does not rob our Lord's teaching of its uniqueness.

3. *The uniqueness of Christ's teaching.* Three factors, among others, constitute this uniqueness.

a. *The Speaker.* Jesus practised what He preached. The Sermon is thus a preaching *of* Him as well as a preaching *by* Him. Since it reflects His unique and perfect filial relationship with His Father, it too is unique.

b. *The setting.* The teaching presupposes the unique Christian Gospel (see chapter 3). It is a description of the quality of response that this Gospel evokes from men, a response permeated by the spirit of divine love.

c. *The selection.* Because the teaching reflects the quality of our Lord's life and because it is so closely related to the Gospel, there is a tremendous amount in all other religions for which it simply has no room. The uniqueness of the Sermon partly consists in what it does *not* contain.

In the light of these three factors, consider a Taoist saying like, 'Repay injury with kindness'. This means something very different in a Taoist context from what it does in a Christian one. In the Taoist context there is no reference to the example of Jesus, no responding to God's love in Christ. Instead, there is an exhortation to practice detachment, to attain a quiescence that refuses to retaliate, an absence of desire to hate or to love the enemy. Such a frame of mind will put the devotee in communion with the quiescent Tao. Here is not Christian love, exhibited by Bray, but what has been dubbed, 'motivated indifference'. Let would-be synthesisers of all religious teachings take note of how different contexts can often radically affect the meaning of apparently similar sayings.

Because of these three factors, Christ's teaching is of a different order from that of any other religious system, the Jewish included. Dominant concepts like 'love' and 'fatherhood' are given a new significance. 'Love' becomes loving other people, not just as we love ourselves, but also as Christ

loved us (John 13[34]). God's fatherhood now means, not just what it had meant to many easterners for three thousand years and more, a God of power and pity, but a Being who sent His Son to win men for intimacy with Himself, an intimacy so deep that Jesus must needs employ a word used previously only for a Jew's earthly father—Abba. This developed concept permeates the Lord's Prayer and, for all its resemblances to certain Jewish prayers, serves to make it unique; and what is done for the Lord's Prayer is done by the Christian concepts of fatherhood and love for all the rest of Christ's teaching.

In a word, the Sermon is unique because it is so bound up with its unique Author. Sadhu Sundar Singh, that great convert to the Christian faith, was once asked by some fellow-countrymen what he found in Christianity that he did not find in any other religion, and replied quite simply 'Jesus Christ'. Here indeed is the justification for preaching Christianity to peoples of other faiths. But when we preach the unique Son of God, we need not omit His unique teaching, a teaching which develops so many partial truths and corrects so many distorted ones as it transposes them into the richer key of the Christian Gospel.

Questions for meditation and discussion

1. Does the fact that parallels can be found for most of Christ's teachings still alarm you? If not, why not?
2. Is it significant that Christ puts the Golden Rule in a positive instead of a negative form?
3. What should be the attitude of the Christian missionary to other faiths?
4. Do you agree that it would be impossible to have an amalgam of all the world's religious teachings?

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